LEAD CONFERENCE

Presbytery of Chicago
March 7, 1998
Park Ridge Presbyterian Church

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WHO DO YOU SAY THAT YOU ARE?

"Who do you say that I am .... You are Peter" Matthew 16:15, 18

"Who Do You Say That I Am?..."

That question is all mixed with one of my most vivid memories of the day when I preached for the first time in my home church. Now that is an auspicious occasion. After all, these are the people who watched you squirm in the pew as a little boy, giggle through the pastoral prayer as an adolescent, regularly nod off ten minutes into the sermon as a teenager exhausted from the arduous revelry of the Saturday night before. These folks know you. Jesus himself didn't do much in Nazareth. "Isn't that just Mary and Joseph's son?" they asked, all those folk who had watched him grow up in the synagogue. So it is a fairly treacherous situation to begin with.

And then there is one's family. I come from a family of railroaders, not preachers, and so the novelty alone meant that they were all there, grandfather, aunts, uncles, cousins. My father was beside himself. To say that he was proud is a great understatement.

There was a fair amount of pressure on the preacher, that is to say, I had been ordained one month. I chose for my text a portion of scripture on which I had done a senior thesis, a very major piece of work. I had waded through every word written about the text in the past century and a good bit of what was written in antiquity. I knew the passage in Greek – as I have not known anything in Greek ever since. I had explored the theological, social and political ramifications of the text from every conceivable angle and had come to many not-very-modest conclusions about its meaning.

The portion of scripture was Matthew 16:13-20, the text this morning. I thought it was a logical choice for so august an occasion as my first sermon in my home church. What I did, of course, was take that thesis, bristling with footnotes and scholarly citations, and reduce it to a sermon.

Fortunately, grace abounds and the content of the sermon was not the issue. When it was over, everybody seemed pleased. A junior high teacher in the congregation with whom I had a history of unpleasant conflicts, shook my hand and without smiling said something like, "You're still talking too fast and too much." In any event, there was the inevitable luncheon. Dad was still effusive. When all the guests left and we were alone, my parents and I, they expressed their pride and support and affection and then Dad said something very important and the reason why

I have shared all this personal memorabilia. He said, "You told us what everybody else in history thought. Next time you preach on that text, save some time at the end for what you think. That's what I want to know."

He was right, of course, so right I recall that incident every time I read or hear the text of Matthew 16:13-20.

It occurs near the middle of the story. Jesus and his friends have been traveling about Galilee for some time, teaching, healing. Crowds of people are beginning to follow him wherever he goes and on the edges of this story there is emerging conflict with the religious authorities.

"Who are people saying that the Son of Man is?" Jesus asked his friends. "Funny you should ask," the disciples said. "Some people think you are John the Baptist... we've even had someone suggest that you are one of the great prophets of Israel reincarnated." Jesus doesn't even acknowledge these speculative suggestions. Instead, he redirects the question to them in the most pointed way possible. "But who do you say that I am?" Now the point of this whole business is that they were not sure who he was. There is no indication that they even discussed it openly. My guess is that personally, in groups of twos and threes, they were talking about it a lot. The point is, the disciples aren't sure – so the question is loaded, and it's very important when Peter says something that must have left the others gasping, something which I think surprised him when he heard his own voice saying, "You are the Christ – the Anointed One – The Messiah – The Son of the Living God." We would like to stop here, with Peter's declaration. We Presbyterians, whose forte has been scholarship and literate religion, want to interrupt this oral exam and head out of the library and see what recent German scholars have to say about "The Anointed One" in the context of ancient Near-Eastern religion. We want to stop right here and have a symposium on the phrase "Son of the Living God." But the passage won't allow us even to pause. But there is so much momentum here, so much energy, Jesus won't allow it and says to Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah...congratulations – that's quite an insight. In fact, it's a God-given moment of revelation." And still the momentum pushes on. "You are Peter and on this rock I will build a church." There it is! The point is not speculation. The question is really not who he is, but who they are. "You are the Christ – and you are Peter." "You are the Son of the Living God. But you – you are a rock on which I'm going to build a church."

The question is not simply what do you believe about Jesus, but who are you, in your life, in relation to him?

The first open debate about who he was occurred when the authorities put a sign on his cross and couldn't agree about what to write on it. The question about who this strange, compelling man from Nazareth was is so intriguing, and it fit so perfectly into the structures of Greek philosophy, that in spite of the way he personalized it, it became the dominant theological and intellectual and political question in Western civilization for several centuries. For hundreds of years the brightest people thought about and debated the nature of Christ. The high point came at the Council of Nicea, called by the Roman Emperor Constantine – to debate and to say something

specific about the mystery of the nature of Jesus Christ, which might also provide religious unity and adhesive to his deteriorating empire. That Council produced the Nicene Creed, which says:

"We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made."

That is soaring, lyrical, pure poetic beauty. It is our oldest and most precious confession. When I say the words I am lifted out of the ordinary and placed among that magnificent communion of saints who out of human history, are one in adoration of Jesus Christ. But it represents a way of thinking about Jesus which is not the only way the New Testament suggests, and perhaps not the best way.

What has happened is that the relationship of the individual to the man Jesus has been cast in terms of believing ideas about Jesus: believing that he is God's son, believing that he had within himself a human nature and a divine nature, that he is of one substance with the Father – etc....Without diminishing the importance of theology, I am suggesting that this is not the only way to think about Jesus. It may not be. And in fact, there are times and places when it gets in the way of our dealing with this man who commands our attention.

I was intrigued to discover that the Latin word "Credo" – "I believe," – from which we get "creed," is related to the Latin word "corda" – "heart." The original meaning of "I believe" was "I set my heart on" – not "I believe these ideas about Jesus to be true," but "I set my heart on Jesus."

In a wonderful book, *Stages of Faith, The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, James Fowler differentiates between belief and faith. "Belief is the holding of certain ideas....Faith is deeper, richer, more personal..." Belief is a function of the mind... faith "involves an alignment of the heart or will." [p. 11]

Can you have faith in Christ if you aren't certain about who he was? That's a problem for us, isn't it? How can you call yourself a Christian if you aren't sure what you believe about Jesus? How can you join the church if you don't have your theology worked out? We all know someone who is a closet Christian, who admires Jesus, is interested in and respects the church, who acts and thinks like a Christian, but who just can't quite affirm it openly because they are not sure what they believe about him, who when they confront the particularities of the Apostles' Creed, experience a definite tightening of the throat muscles. I have the sense that there are a lot of people who live on the periphery of the church because they have the mistaken notion that you have to know what you believe with some precision before you belong inside. And I think that's backwards. I think the sequence is the other way around... That's how it has been in my experience and that's how it is in the New Testament.

The disciples were following Jesus without understanding. They were following because he had touched something in them which was far more profound than their belief system. He didn't administer a theological examination as a prerequisite for discipleship.

And so it is, I believe, for most of us. On most days we could not say exactly what we believed about Jesus.... There are occasions... there are experiences of clarity... there are moments of revelation when we know – but they are not constant. They come unexpectedly, like gifts of God – which is what they are. One day you're singing words you've sung all your life...

> "Be this, while life is mine,
> My canticle divine,
> May Jesus Christ be praised..."

And on this day those words vibrate with energy and truth and you know them in the very depth of your being. But it isn't always like that.

One day you're standing there saying the words you pretty much mumble through every Sunday...

> "and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord,
> who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
> born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under
> Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and
> buried..."

And on this day those familiar words resonate with such meaning and profundity that your voice cracks as you say them.

It's like walking up a mountain path in a thick fog, someone said. You can't see anything, and suddenly there is an opening in the fog and there, for an instant is the glorious mountain on which you are walking, and the peak, glistening with snow and a bright blue sky, and then the fog closes in, and you keep on walking. We do our believing in those moments of clarity when God gives us experiences of sharp truth. We do most of our living on faith, on the path, in the fog, remembering the clear picture we were given, anticipating another one, but in the meantime, walking on in trust.

The Christian church has not been at its best when it has invested most of its energy in theological orthodoxy. That way of thinking has led to arrogance, exclusivism and some of our saddest moments. Absolute certainty about dogma, believing right ideas about Jesus has led to crusades, inquisitions and pogroms and of course, division and schism. Some of our distinguished theologians are already excommunicating some of us – calling us betrayers.

In a provocative and very important new book, *Christianity and the World Religions*, Hans Kung wonders how history would have turned out had Christian missionaries presented the ethic of Jesus, the love, justice and compassion with modesty and grace – instead of trying to persuade everybody in the world to think in the Greek philosophic categories of Nicea. Kung sees the only hope for world peace to be along the lines of finding commonality among world religions and believes the way is open for us – in the spirit of Jesus himself who, writes Kung, "never

questioned anyone about the true faith, (nor) asked anyone to profess his or her orthodoxy. He expects no theoretical reflection, but an urgent practical decision." [p. 116]

So it begins, the whole matter of Christianity, in an encounter with a man: a man who lived in history. It begins, Christianity does, at a very human level – as my life is touched by his life.

I have a notion that we already know that: that for most of us, there was an experience, there have been times, when we encountered Jesus Christ, our hearts were warmed, we were touched, the fog lifted, the angels sang momentarily. For most of us Presbyterians it's our religious secret. We're not good a talking about it. But we have been touched by Jesus Christ in ways we couldn't begin to explain. That's all right. If you've ever been in love you know there is powerful reality that is not necessarily rational – if you love the Cubs, for that matter, you know about reality that will not be explained objectively.

What Jesus Christ requires of us is not consistently orthodox beliefs about him, but decisions made to follow him, faith decisions. The question is, "who is he?" But even more to the point, "who are we in relationship to him?"

That question comes at you daily. It will come at you disguised in secular dress. It will come at you politically, socially, economically, relationally.

"Who do you say that I am…" means "Who are you in relation to me…"

And you and I will answer in the decisions we make, the choices, the commitments, the faithfulness by which we live.

One of the brilliant and remarkable geniuses of our era was Albert Schweitzer. In a life that included exceptional achievement in music, medicine, he turned to New Testament scholarship. He wrote a book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which has been important to Christian scholarship ever since.

The last paragraph is lovely. In it Schweitzer lays aside his scholarship and gives his testimony…

> "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside, he came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow me!'…And to those who obey, whether they be wise of simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is."

"Leave some time at the end for what you think," I was told…

Well, like Peter, I believe he is the Christ, God's Son. I believe he is the one promised, the one coming into the world from the beginning of time.

I believe he is Lord of all,
Lord of all time,
Lord of this time....

I believe he was the God who is love, justice, hope, power and creativity – incarnate.

I believe his human life contained all of God that can be gotten into a human life...

I believe his humanity.... He is my brother. He knew everything it means to be human.... The good and the bad.... He knows my

hungers,
passions,
joys,
aspirations,
hopes,
fears....

I believe he was God's blessing on all human life. I believe he makes my life holy – because of his humanity.

I believe what he did was for me – living, loving, teaching, healing, accepting, suffering, and dying.

I believe death did not defeat him, nor contain him.

I believe he comes into my life and into the life of the world. I believe he is my hope and the hope of the world.

But – the point is, and it is the point, like Peter, sometimes I can say more than I understand. And like Peter, some days I mean more of it then other days, and I expect that's the way it is for you.

That's all right. Because saying it right – getting the theology right is not the point.

You don't have to know who he is exactly to be a follower....

You don't have to have all your beliefs straight to be a Christian, or a church member, or to claim him.

So it is an invitation, finally, to believe what you are able to believe ... to affirm what God has given you with clarity ... but... regardless of the sophistication of your personal credo – to understand that what matters is not believing ideas about him but "setting your heart on Jesus..."

And then I believe the promise is true – in the toils and joys, in the life we live in him, he will show us who he is....

In that church where I preached a sermon on this text ... long ago ... I learned a hymn in Sunday School. We sang it a lot.

It is not a sophisticated hymn, but it is a pretty tune and it is one of my favorites...

When I cant' explain what I believe... when I can't get my Christology into the right words ... it helps me to remember this hymn and to sing it quietly. The words sing better than they read.

It's the last line of "Fairest Lord Jesus..." Help me sing it....

> "Thee will I cherish, thee will I honor,
> Thou, my soul's glory, joy and crown."

For moments of clarity, Great God, in which we know what we believe, we praise you... And for the other moments, when all we are sure of is your love, we praise you as well.

In all our moments, give us grace to be faithful to Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.